

Puget Sound groups
test POS materials

3 tips for boosting
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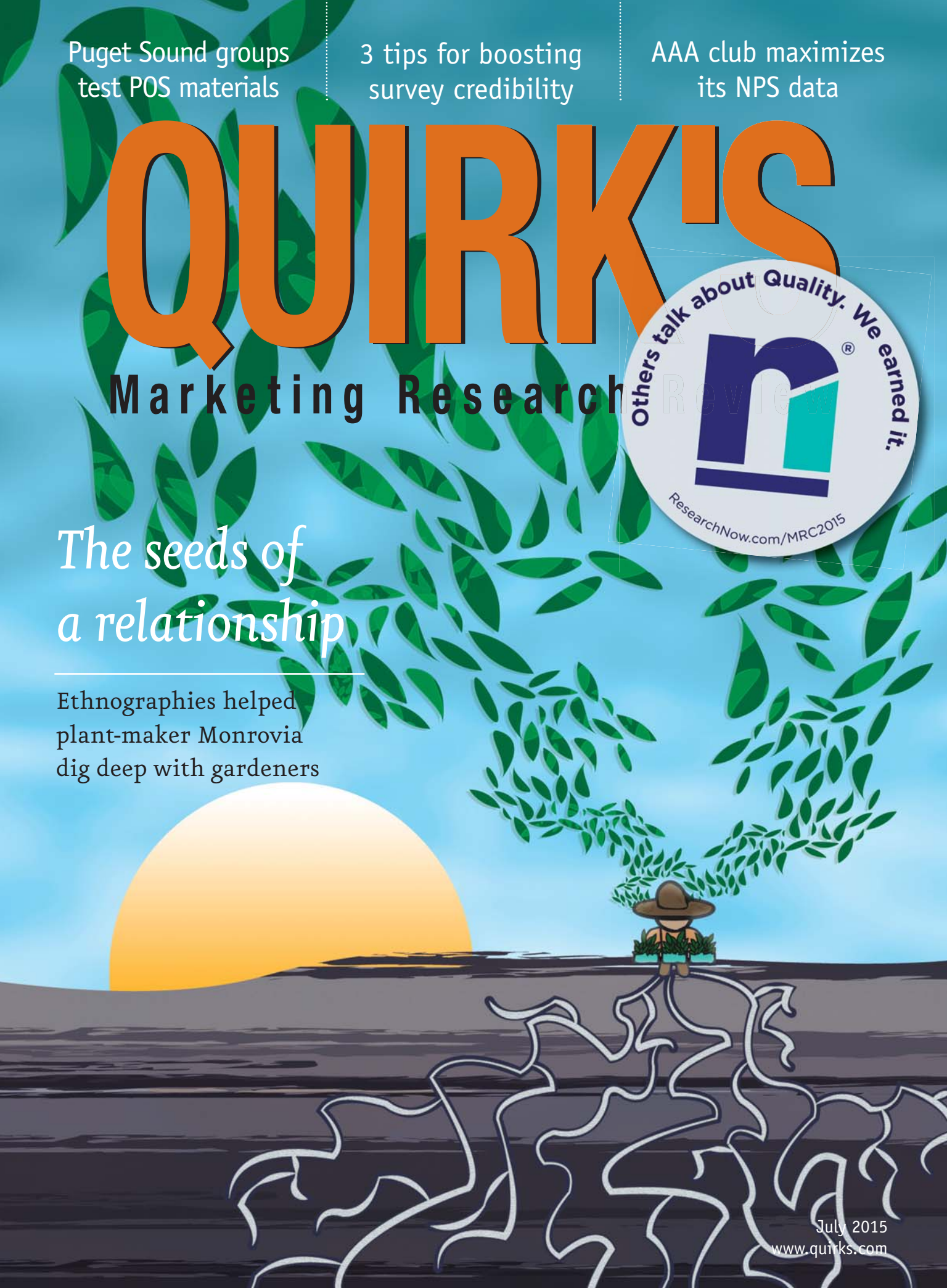
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The seeds of a relationship

Ethnographies helped
plant-maker Monrovia
dig deep with gardeners



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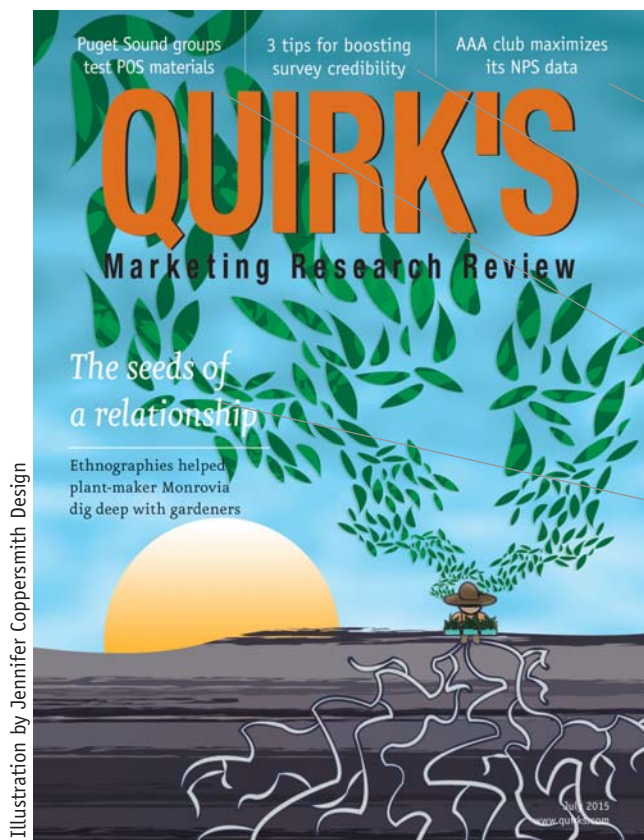


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The seeds of a relationship

Monrovia dug deep with gardeners to find out how to establish a bond with them

| By Noël Adams

snapshot

In-person and digital ethnographies were just two of the research methods plant-grower Monrovia used to get at the root of gardeners' habits and preferences.

Who grew the last plant you purchased? If you happen to know, you're probably an avid gardener – and you also happen to be in the minority. It turns out that many people who buy plants pay little or no attention to who grows them. Instead, they focus on the plants themselves. In fact, many people view plants as commodities.

So how do you sell premium-grown plants to people who are unaware that there are differences in how plants are grown?

That is the challenge facing Azusa, Calif.-based Monrovia, which grows high-quality plants and sells through multiple distribution channels, including directly to consumers at nurseries and garden centers and at home improvement chains such as Lowe's.

The people at Monrovia know plants. They love plants. They understand quality. They understand horticulture. But they didn't know enough about their current and potential customers' needs and how to meet them.

They also know dedicated gardeners. But they wanted to know about other people who aren't already loyal to the Monrovia brand.

After all, plants aren't just things. True, they can be decorative but they are also living. They grow and, alas, they sometimes die. Caring for them can be emotional and richly fulfilling. But who are the people who buy them and what do plants mean to them?

The firm wanted to know what made people select certain plants over others. Was it color? Was it price? And why do people beautify their outdoor spaces in the first place? Do they love them? Do they want to show them off? Do they grow plants to connect with the planet? How much do they care about how a plant is grown – about quality as it relates to price?

Monrovia decided to answer these myriad questions by getting to know its potential customers in new ways – really getting to know them. “We wanted to really peel back some layers and not just ask questions about why people buy this kind of plant or that kind of plant but actually dig a



quirks.com/articles/2015/20150706.aspx





little deeper and get some insights into how people think of their outdoor spaces,” says Katie Tamony, chief marketing officer for Monrovia.

It wanted to create a long-term relationship with customers and refresh the brand, which has been around since 1926. “We wanted to discover new connections that we could make to the consumer. We wanted to identify the needs and problems that the consumer has and raise awareness and consideration of the brand among a wider group of potential gardeners and homeowners.”

They hired our firm, Clearworks, a San Francisco research firm, to get there.

Know the customers

To understand why and how customers purchase anything, you need to know the customers themselves. To help Monrovia meet its needs, we needed to understand what consumers thought about their homes and their gardens and how they related to their outdoor spaces. We needed to understand their goals.

In other words, we wanted to get inside their heads and understand their vision and dreams. We used detailed in-home and digital ethnographies followed by a quantitative survey to develop personas. Then we tested brand platforms with the most promising personas.

We interviewed 12 people in their homes and also while they shopped for plants. We observed 25 others virtually, also in their homes and while shopping and interviewed half of those by phone.

We analyzed the in-person and virtual interviews and used that data to design a survey. We did a quantitative survey to reveal the personas. We tested specific brand messages with the personas we had discovered.

Beyond words

For both the in-person and digital ethnographies, our goals were the same. We wanted to hear people’s voices, look in their eyes – observe

their behaviors. We wanted the type of data that would allow us to figure out who they were and what they care about, beyond words.

Obviously we needed to observe people, whether in person or virtually, in their own spaces. Their expressions spoke volumes.

For the in-home and shoppalongs we sent in two interviewers – a primary and a secondary – plus a videographer who documented everything with photos and video.

We used our ethnographic field guide with videographers so they were all aligned in different markets on what we wanted to capture. We instructed them to document specific moments in the home and in the garden, recording a range of things from facial expressions to actual plants as well as the house and yard.

For the digital ethnographies, we had people replicate the in-home and shopping experience by recording their experience with full narration using their mobile devices and computers. We also gave very specific directions about what to video record, what photos to take, etc.

We started both the in-person and digital observations in people’s homes so we could get to know them. We toured their yards and gardens, while asking questions about what they were planting and why. How much did they know about gardening? How did they feel about their yards? We literally had them point out flowers and plants and trees and asked what they were planting, how they planted and why.

We asked about why they created the spaces they did, what they wished they could do with their spaces and how they felt about flowers, plants and trees. What motivated them to do particular things in their gardens and yards?

It didn’t take much to get people to open up. They liked talking about their relationship to plants – what they liked, what they didn’t like, how they did it, etc. They liked showing us their spaces and what they did.

We were able to get very intimate, asking about their fears about planting and why they cared. They told us about their dreams and wishes for their outdoor spaces.

This was critical when it came to bringing the different personas to life. For instance, no one liked to experience the death of a plant. But a plant death meant different things to the different personas. Some blamed themselves and others blamed the sellers. Still others had a more nuanced view: They wished they’d had more information about how to grow and wanted to learn.

These are things we really couldn't have understood with other methodologies. We really had to be there.

Went shopping with them

After the in-home tour and interview, we went shopping with them (in person and virtually) so that again, we could see the experience through their eyes and understand how they shopped.

We didn't take them shopping to a store of our choosing. Instead, we asked where they shopped for plants and went to that store.

We walked the aisles and interviewed them in the store. We wanted to know everything about how and why they shopped. Did they like going to warehouse stores like Lowe's or small garden centers where they could talk to horticulturalists?

What did they look for? Did they linger a long time in any particular section? Did they read labels? Did they talk to salespeople or just want to grab plants and go?

Did they look at tags? Did they notice who supplied the plants?

What grabbed their attention? What attributes did they want a plant to have? What was important? Price? Quality? Color? How did they actually shop? Were they directed or did they browse?

Did they enjoy shopping or just want to get it over with, treating it as a necessary evil?

After shopping we conducted

another interview to dig deeper into things we had observed while shopping and focus on brand and the meaning of brands.

Took a few hours

There were some important differences between the in-home and digital ethnographies. In-home interviews took a few hours and three dedicated people (two interviewers plus a videographer) to conduct. They were necessarily limited by time and geography. The digital ethnographies took place over a week.

The big advantage of doing a virtual study is that it allowed us to cast a much larger geographic net since we didn't need to be there in person. That was pretty essential when it comes to gardening; different climates will affect outcomes.

But we also knew that sometimes digital ethnographies can be challenging in terms of generating deep insights. We overcame those challenges in a few ways:

- We used all the tools at our disposal. Our platform allowed participants to use mobile phones, tablets, computers, digital cameras, Webcams – any device of their choosing.
- We developed detailed exercises with instructions and questions.
- Our instructions were very specific. We told people exactly the kinds of videos and photos they should take for their narrated tour.

- We had them answer questions in their own time about who they were, what they planted and why they planted it.
- We conducted follow-up telephone interviews with 15 of the 25 people, allowing us to dig deeper into motivations and feelings.

In the end, we were able to closely replicate the in-home studies and obtain high-quality data from both.

Rich insights

Through both in-home and the digital ethnographies we were able to provide rich insights into the development of the quantitative survey.

The power came from the survey design component and making sure all the elements in the inspiration, planning, planting and purchasing processes were comprehensively reflected.

Because we had such robust qualitative research data, we were able to derive really robust attitudinal, emotional and behavioral content.

In the output of the quantitative survey we identified clusters and sized those clusters. We were also able to understand broader purchasing behaviors and brand awareness measures. We then looked at the clusters, described them qualitatively and named them. We brought them to life using the photos, videos, quotes and pictures.

We found there were four different personas, three of which are high-potential targets for Monrovia.

Once we discovered the personas, we were able to test the actual brand platform that Monrovia will use moving forward to drive marketing efforts. After all, the whole point of the study was to yield data so Monrovia could better reach its customers.

We tested three brand platforms to see how they resonated with the target personas. We wanted to understand what customers liked and didn't like about each position and why.

We conducted research via 45-minute phone interviews with 24 consumers across the three personas using a Web interface to share the brand platform elements. We showed and read them brand statements and gauged their reactions, literally down to word-choice level.

There were some messages that

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Monrovia thought would really resonate that did not and some messages whose value and impact the study reinforced.

Why it was important


Some of the examples of results illustrate exactly why it was important to conduct the study the way we did.

- Many of Monrovia's potential customers don't read gardening magazines, where Monrovia had been spending the bulk of its ad dollars, and instead go online for information. Monrovia responded by moving spending from garden interest and garden enthusiast magazines to a more diversified digital portfolio, targeting consumers by behavior, such as when people purchase home/garden products or search for relevant information.
- The group of people who were more practical, less emotional gardeners who just wanted to get into the store, buy their plants and get it done was much larger than Monrovia had thought. Despite – or perhaps because of – their need to get in, get out and get planting, they still cared about quality and would pay a higher price for it. "Their size in the market and lack of knowledge of our brand was kind of a revelation to us," Tamony says. Monrovia will gear content and campaigns directly to them, with messages about solutions for their landscape problems.
- Monrovia had also assumed that people were afraid of shopping for plants because they don't know enough about gardening and were overwhelmed. But the research revealed that people are a lot more confident about choosing plants. "They need help keeping things growing well and getting the results they want," Tamony says.
- People shop for plants everywhere and are less likely to be shopping at one kind of store or another. "We want to make our plants available wherever people want them," Tamony says. "We want to be at the independent garden center. We want to be at Lowe's. We want to be online."
- Words matter. The word "craftsman," for instance, didn't resonate

as powerfully with consumers as Monrovia thought. Consumers want to know less about the company and more about the benefits to them – healthy plants, highest quality – and the results they can achieve.

Consider many steps

Monrovia will consider many steps as it realigns and energizes its brand over the next few years, Tamony says. "We are really on a mission to understand outdoor-interested homeowners in a way that we never

understood them before and deliver more for them. All of the research helped us create a new brand platform that is not just about having the best plants or better plants, which is what we are known for," she says. "Instead it is about something else: It is about helping the consumer achieve their dreams and goals." 

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